

Portsmouth, New Hampshire's Romantic Winter Stroll



Image Courtesy: David J. Murray

It was absolute magic. I will treasure this trip for a very long time. And the most amazing thing about it is that it was entirely spur of the moment.

Sure I'd read about the [Candlelight Stroll](#) last December. In the middle of the holiday rush of parties and baking and shopping and getting the kids to think more kindly about their cousins who come up every Christmas Eve, I saw a picture in the newspaper of a horse-drawn wagon on a snow-dusted road, lanterns glowing in front of what looked like Colonial houses. I read the story that said

[Strawbery Banke Museum](#) in [Portsmouth](#) had been doing this for more than 25 years, with holiday decorations and a bonfire, and it sounded fabulous. But I guess my subconscious filed that image away on its own 'must do' list - and there we were, on the second weekend in December, standing in front of Stoodley's Tavern as a couple of guys in tri-corns passed us by headed toward the parade ground where the bonfire shot sparks into the air.

The [historic houses](#) were everything you'd expect from a classic New England stage set, but the people who "inhabit" the houses - especially "Mrs. Shapiro," making latkes out of the potatoes from her own Russian émigré vegetable garden out back - were a complete surprise. The whole weekend was like that.

It all started when Tim called to say his conference had been postponed and we suddenly had an open weekend. The kids and I had planned to drive over to my mother's to help get the decorations out of the attic, so I did one of those quick 'change of plans' shifts and presto! The kids were staying at Grandma's until Sunday and Tim and I were on the road with a last minute, late-arrival reservation (a "[shopping package](#)" deal) in downtown Portsmouth, New Hampshire - our first getaway alone in about five years.

The [drive to Portsmouth](#) was easy - Interstate 95 all the way to Exit 7. From the off-ramp we could see a white steeple - which turned out to be the landmark North Church in the middle of Market Square in downtown Portsmouth - shining like our own personal beacon in the night. We easily found our [hotel](#), which had a fire crackling merrily in the lobby, left the luggage in our room and decided on a late-night brandy in the bar. Can't remember the last time we did that!

The next day broke on one of those crystal clear, early winter mornings that just beg you to get outside. Over coffee and absolutely decadent waffles in the sunny dining room, we plotted our strategy for the day like a couple of kids playing hooky from school. When my sister was here last summer, she said the [shopping](#) was amazing and [tax-free](#). From couture and fashion accessories that would do the Hamptons proud, to craft boutiques and antiques galleries tucked into 19th century storefronts lining the brick sidewalks. All within an easy walk of that central Market Square. We knew the Candlelight Stroll started at, well, candle-time, and that we wanted to spend time together but had certain "errands" we needed to do

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independently. So we decided to spend the morning reconnoitering around North Church: Deer Street, Market, Bow, Daniel, State, Pleasant and back up Congress. In spite of the holiday rush being in full swing we couldn't believe how friendly the shop-keepers were! Each store seemed to have its own personal welcome and little nibbles of homemade candy or holiday cookies and hot cider or some other special touch. And the people we passed on the sidewalk actually smiled and said "hello" as if they had all forgotten how to be strangers. It took me a minute to realize they were talking to me. (Note to self: been in the city too long!)



When we stopped at one of the housewares shops that had beautiful holiday linens in the window, we learned that upstairs was a complimentary wine tasting. We had to check that out, and in the process found a wonderful bottle that Tim's brother (the wine snob) will certainly enjoy - especially when he sees the gift certificate to come back for the [wine festival](#) in February where he can meet the vintner.

We had decided on a light 'stop when we're hungry' lunch in one of Portsmouth's cafes because we had asked about [dinner options](#) and the hotel had recommended a late reservation at the city's newest hot bistro. (You could spend a week in Portsmouth and have a fabulous dinner at a different place each night.) As I stretched my toes in my boots, I found myself looking at Tim over the rim of my coffee cup, admiring the way the light caught the silver in his hair. Portsmouth is a wonderfully romantic place.

So then of course, the cell phone rang. It was the kids, who were doing fine. We told them both we'd all come back here so they could check out the funky fashion and live music scene (Portsmouth is just 20 minutes from the [University of New Hampshire](#) in Durham and has a lively student scene.) Then it was back to the game plan for the balance of the afternoon.

A true "game plan," actually, as Tim had a college game he wanted to catch part of (at least that's what he said he was going to do but he had this little grin that makes me think he had been taking notes on one or two things I had casually admired). I knew he could stop at one of the brewpub sports bars to catch the score. I had a few more names on my gift list, too - including his - and had noticed a leather-bound volume I wanted to look at more closely. So we split up, agreeing to meet back at the hotel for a glass of wine at sunset before we headed out for the Candlelight Stroll.

Mileage & Drive Times

Boston, MA to Portsmouth, NH — 60 Miles, 1 Hour

New York, NY to Portsmouth, NH — 265 Miles, 4.75 Hours

Providence, RI to Portsmouth, NH — 125 Miles, 2 Hours

Hartford, CT to Portsmouth, NH — 150 Miles, 2.5 Hours

Philadelphia, PA to Portsmouth, NH — 360 Miles, 6.5 Hours

Montreal, QC to Portsmouth, NH — 300 Miles, 5 Hours

Well, that's exactly what we did and that's when Portsmouth's magic gathered us up and took us to another time, where candles glow and horses in shaggy coats breathe warm steam when you reach to rub their noses. Where church bells ring the hour and the voices of carolers and laughter slip in and out of the shadows of century-old streetscapes. Where greens and spices mix in the air with woodsmoke. And where, when you finally emerge from a festive fireside, the feathers of snowflakes are rustling down from the silent winter night. They call it "Vintage Christmas" in Portsmouth. I call it a midwinter night's dream.